Title: **All Down the Line: Permutation Poetry in Three South African Journals, 1965 – 1975**

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Abstract:

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the literary journals *Wurm*, *Ophir* and *Izwi* published a significant amount of formally experimental poetry by several local as well as a few European writers. This work included the specialised forms of procedural and permutation poetry, which were popular internationally during this time frame, but which also fall into a longer tradition of concrete poetry and its related forms. In the following article, I explain these specific forms in relation to a global literary-historical framework. I then provide an overview of what my work with the journals' archives indicates to be all of the permutation and procedural poetry published by these three periodicals within the decade, 1965-1975, and provide a descriptive analysis of the texts.

All Down the Line: Permutation Poetry in Three South African Journals, 1965 - 1975

Procedural constrained writing and permutation poetry, as well as related concrete, abstractional, and formalist experiments with typewritten poetry constitute a theoretically challenging presence at the cusp of high modernism's shift into the literary postmodern. In South Africa these forms, and in particular permutation poetry, were briefly but influentially popular in the late 1960s with a reader- and writership associated with three literary journals: *Wurm* (1966-1970), *Ophir* (1967-1976) and *Izwi* (1971-1974).

This spate of experimental writing was especially influenced by the Dutch, Belgian and Czech avant-gardes as well as the French group Oulipo. It fostered otherwise improbable contact with European writers and publications. It also shifted the focus of some South African writers to the possibilities of form being as potent as content, and opened up new theoretical debates and modes of eluding, countering, or otherwise defying the establishment and its condoned cultural mainstreams. While some of the work produced within this context is whimsically transient, other texts are innovative enough to be considered lasting beyond their original impact. In this article I provide a complete overview of all the procedural and constrained poems published in the three journals across a decade. I also include in the discussion a few texts that do not quite meet the criteria of these categories, but are clearly related to them.

Taking the long view, Dick Higgins, in "Pattern Poetry as Paradigm" traces antecedents of formalist poetry to early Christian visual texts (1989, 407), mostly ornamental devotional pieces working with the cruciform silhouette as container or background for text. He notes also that baroque-era labyrinth poems (1989, 408) bear a relationship to more recent forms. Labyrinths are essentially puzzle poems, readable in a number of ways to reach the

message, and are visually akin to modern-day ‘word searches’ in which words have to be found in a grid of seemingly random letters and then ordered into phrases. Conceptually such blank labyrinths most resemble postmodern found poetry.

Trends occuring in the interwar period in Europe, specifically Dada and Futurism, had a lasting and profound impact on the development of concrete poetry. The Italian Futurists produced poster-like poems with text phrases set as graphic elements, but at the same time they were aware of the technology of type and print as exerting significant influence on the process, and thus style, of writing. The Futurists were fundamentally concerned with “pictorial vectors of energy and intensity” (Rasula & McCaffrey 1998, 3) and a praxis governed by a number of profound injunctions: “conventional syntax [was] to be banished from poetry […] verbs were to be used in the infinitive, adjectives, adverbs and conjunctions abolished, punctuation replaced by mathematical symbols and the personal pronoun avoided” (White 2012, 23). Their Russian counterparts shared these concerns, and included ideals of liberating elements of written language – letters and words, from their assigned roles in language as discourse (1998: 4). Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffrey quote from a manifesto: “You have seen the letters in their words – lined up in a row, humiliated, with cropped hair” (Rasula & McCaffrey 1998, 4). Dada, with its rejection of “the trappings of western bourgeois rationalism and civilised sensibility” (Stockwell 2012, 49) brought a determined irreverence and chaotic freedom to the literary experiment, as well as the perhaps undervalued gesture of breaching arbitrary conventions, for its own sake.

The Dutch art, design and architecture movement De Stijl also produced some formally experimental writing, including “wordless sound structures” (Rasula & McCaffrey, 1998, 13) by Theo van Doesburg (who wrote under a pseudonym). There were also some unaffiliated practitioners following the same general trends, notably Christian Morgenstern,

whose “Fisches Nachtgesang” consists solely of metre markings and no words, and Jan Nepomucen Miller, who devised oddly dynamic poems made up entirely of punctuation.

The types of concrete poetry (of which permutations are a species) usually differentiated are listed by Siegfried Schmidt in “Perspectives on the Development of Post-Concrete Poetry” (1982, 109-113). These are “poesia visiva” which makes use of “photo-text-collages”; “text-corpora” or “object…or plastic poems”; “action-poem” (“public actions with writing”), and “text-collage”, which would include the cut-up and fold-in methods developed by William Burroughs and Brion Gysin with written text, visual art, and sound recordings. There is also “found poetry” in which poems are identified and marked out, in some way, in larger texts of various kinds. “Haptic poems” focus on the tactile surfaces, shapes and textures of texts as part of their meaning-making; “conceptualisation” which Schmidt defines as a convergence of tendencies: “the *conceptualisation* of visual poetry and the *lingualisation* of fine arts” (1982, 113).

While formalist poetry in general is underpinned by the premise of an engagement of written language as plastic form, the more specific games played by concrete and constrained poems appear as either serious applications of logic and cryptography to the medium, or as incidental cleverness straying into the space of art. Quirky variations on the theme of writing with specific constraints have yielded chronograms, in which letters in a sentence are given numerical values, most typically through the correspondence of Roman numerals to the alphabet, or through numerological systems; acrostics, in which the first letter, word or syllable of each line or stanza when isolated from the text are written out in sequence spell out a word or phrase; and anagrams, which are essentially condensed permutations in which the letters of a word or sentence can be rearranged to create new combinations of meaning. They have also, however, created a significant body of articulate, interesting, and often

complex and innovative works, or systems which can potentially yield a variety of texts if applied to an idea, phrase, text, or language.

The work of the innovative and influential, and remarkably long-lasting conceptual literary collective Oulipo (sometimes written OuLiPo to preserve the name's acronymic origin), illustrates this possibility. The Ouvroir de Littérature Potentialle, which translates as Workshop of Potential Literature, is concerned with the creative freedom enabled and dexterity practised through the use of formal procedural constraints. Jan Baetens defines it as a "more radical version of formal or rule-based writing, both at the level of what it is, technically speaking, and at the level of what it means, culturally speaking". He adds that a constraint "constitutes a *supplementary* rule, i.e., a rule that, far from being already used in a large set of literary texts, appears as something added to certain texts as a special feature". In addition, such a rule must be used "systematically, i.e. throughout the whole text (exceptions are only accepted if they break the rules in highly sophisticated ways" (Baetens 2012, 115). In that they are essentially "algorithm-based experiments" (Gallix 2013, 3) the emphasis is on process rather than product. "What made OuLiPo so different, at least in the beginning, is not its *practice* of constrained writing but its *theory*" (Baetens 2012, 120). For instance, the 'N+7' constraint requires that each noun of an existing text (or text-in-progress) is replaced by the seventh noun after it in a dictionary; a lipogram relies on the omission of a letter, forcing the writer to find ways around the absence (Bray et al 2012, 117).

Permutation poetry itself has eluded much of the scholarship around formalist and concrete poetry produced by coherent groups. One possible reason is that that it tends towards the boundaries of most understandings of the poetic; another is that it may be dismissed as tangential. Typically it has a more or less single meaning which, once grasped, leaves little for the interpretation and inference of conventional literary studies. Higgins, writing from an arts perspective, suggests that the lack of scholarly attention paid to what he

terms “pattern poetry” has to do with its interdisciplinary and therefore liminal situation “conceptually between the literary and visual art media” and the resulting assumption that “it was therefore unable to stand on its own and was thus inherently mediocre” (1989, 401). He defines “pattern poetry” as “poetry in which a visual image is formed by the placement of words or letters” (1989, 401), a useful and inclusive term, which might be expanded slightly by the suggestion that a strong visual presence, such as an unusual if unrecognisable text shape, or a clear and distinct repeated visual or process design, should also be included. These graphic elements also constitute a focus on pattern, even if they do not have a mimetic component, and bring out the plasticity of language in a different way. Higgins suggests also that pattern poems are to some extent intrinsically different from visual poems, in that they “represent processes rather than things” (1989, 403) even though their formal abstraction might result in a visual representation. Writing about the multimedia cut-up, collage, and permutation work of interdisciplinary artist Brion Gysin, John Corbett provides a list of the effects and strategies of permutation: “systematisation of the pun. The foisting of wordplay back onto the reader/ listener. Revelation of multiple meaning. Atomisation of syntax. Ambivalence of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations; the structural function of individual words becomes mutable” (1998, 118).

The poems included here are not all permutation pieces according to the strictest definition, which, in summary, is that:

> a permugram is a poem in which the words of the first line are permutated…to make the following lines. The poem has as many lines as there are words in the first line. No words are added or removed after the first line. Words may only be changed according to the rules of grammar (including homonyms…). Adding punctuation and line breaks is allowed. A title can be chosen freely. (permugram.org, 2015, 1)

Rather, a number of poems included in this selection can be seen to practise the form so long as it is useful, but carry on from it if the writing of the piece so requires; or to be significantly inspired by its premise, but not necessarily bound by its precise execution.

Altogether these criteria allow for the consideration of fourteen poems, by nine poets, found in the three journals within a ten year period.

The first example, an untitled piece by Peter Horn, is a work of irony. It appeared within Horn's essay "En Avant?" in issue 3 of *Wurm* (1966). In this article Horn feigns surprise, indignation, and shame at the allegation, made in the previous issue by David Botes, that "ons nog nie 'n Afrikaanse avant-garde het nie" (we do not yet have an Afrikaans avant-garde) (1996, 49)[i]. In his article Botes, using a pseudonym, "outline[s] the current avant-garde traditions among Belgian poets" (Gardiner 2013**,** 11). Horn takes issue with Botes's implicit criticism of the Afrikaans literary scene as lagging behind its European counterparts, and constructs, in a seemingly off-hand manner and followed by the sarcastic comment, "ek hoop jy is nou tevrede met my" (I hope you are satisfied with me now) (1966, 51), an imperfect permutation sequence:

dadai
daida
draai
braai
brian
britn
brits

The impatience of the poem is part of its wit, along with the use of the structural similarities between the words, as well as their connotations. The first word in the sequence is ostensibly a reference to Dada, the second can be read as an abbreviated form of "daai, daar", that is, Afrikaans for 'that, there'. "Draai" is 'to carry' in the same language. "Braai" is the South African version of a barbecue. "Brian" is an English man's name, "britn" perhaps a reference to Britain as another cultural and linguistic legacy informing the local debate, to

which Horn brings the poem around in the final line, “brits”, an industrial area north of Johannesburg. Horn simultaneously makes fun of the practice of permutation, and adds meaningfully local references to an otherwise unrooted wordplay. His point is that what Botes upholds as the locally unattained pinnacle of European sophistication is easy, pointless and irrelevant to the local literary moment.

This exchange seems to have been a small argument within a bigger debate going on at the time. Writing about the literary journal scene in Johannesburg and Pretoria, Michael Gardiner (2013) is dismissive of *Wurm*’s politics of rebellion, stating that “the group that founded and supported *Wurm* were […] responding in the usual avant-garde manner, reacting to the claustrophobic constraints of the establishment in their search for the new, the different, and […] the experimental” (10). As much is affirmed by the journal’s editorials as well as by one of the editors, Phil du Plessis, in his account of *Wurm*’s life, “Memoire tot Oriëntasie” (1970). Gardiner, rather than indulging the publication’s naiveté, claims that “such standard behaviour took on…some weird and local distortions” (2013, 10) as the journal developed. He is primarily skeptical of the group’s uncritical acceptance of Afrikaans and its literary-cultural creation mythology, and of their claiming this linguistic and literary tradition to the point of unhesitatingly staging a rebellion against it. In doing so, he seems to suggest, they prove its authority and reveal their relationship to its power, when surely they must have had some inkling of the troubled politics of the language’s politicised public presence. Furthermore, Gardiner suggests that this acceptance informed their Eurocentric ideology, which is essentially what sparked and sustained the conversation which Horn’s poem exemplified.

Larry Schwarz’s untitled poem “no bird” in *Izwi* 20 (1974) makes no such point. However, it is effective as both a permutation and a visual text. Its shape is reminiscent of a gestural or abstracted bird in flight. Structurally it is a simple inversion of one line, “no bird

clings to the Sky"/ "no Sky clings to a bird". This symmetrical pair, essentially a spoonerism with adjusted pronouns, forms the bird's wings. The elaboration "Sky for dear life" forms the axis of its spine across which they meet. The 's' of "Sky" is capitalised to provide a slight enlargement at the bird's head, thus giving it direction.

Wopko Jensma produced several procedural poems which, like Schwarz's, contain a graphic element. His work appeared in *Ophir* as well as *Izwi*. Many of Jensma's permutation poems follow a similar pattern, and demonstrate a dual process. Firstly, the poems are reliant on a sequential alteration of a line, one letter, space or syllable at a time. For instance, in the untitled "kniediep" (*Ophir*, 1976) the phrase "kniediep in die kak" (knee deep in shit) is progressively altered by the shift of word spacing to abstraction, as in "knie di epi ndi", and then with equally paced method, brought back to its original form.

Secondly, the poems are subjected to a spatial recession or incision, being erased or covered incrementally, to create smooth angled disappearances and emergences within them. Thus at its apex, the same poem contains a line of a single letter, before slowly expanding back to the width of the full phrase. This group of poems, including "kniediep", was published in 1976 in *Ophir* 23 and then as the "Gomringer Variasies" ('Gomringer Variations', with reference to pioneering concreteist Eugen Gomringer) in Jensma's last book of poems, *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977).

Probably the most striking of Jensma's poems to make use of this structure is "Move 2" (*Izwi*, 1974). In it Jensma melds the phrase "i stuck a knife in my soul" into a solid plastic unity by removing any capitals and word breaks. He then subjects this figuratively violent statement to the same systematic letter-by-letter geometrisation, with the bottom of the poem being the tip of a blade, at its sharpest point nothing but the letter 'l' of the stabbed soul.

Phil du Plessis published several permutation poems, in the form of grid or labyrinth pieces, in 1968. They are symmetrical, evenly spaced blocks of font in which words, and through the connections, repetitions, and otherwise formed patterns between them, meanings, have to be found and configured by the reader. “Kwadrantiese Aleatoriek” (Quadrant Vicissitude) appeared in *Wurm* 9 (1968). It comprises four text blocks printed across two pages, each of which is an “aansig” or ‘view’. The first and third rectangles are plotted 20 digits across and 16 down; the second and fourth are of the same dimensions, but with the width and height switched around. Only seven letters of the alphabet, a, i, k, m, n, r, v, are used, and they appear in lower case, with a few seemingly random exceptions. The number of letters, 7, corresponds to the number reached by adding the digits (not values) in the number of lines on one axis of the rectangles, 16. 20, if its digits are added, yields 2; 2 by 2 makes four, the number of text blocks in the sequence. In using the number 7, with all its esoteric connotations, for the number of letters (which is exactly the number needed to make up the three words to be found in all the blocks), du Plessis pairs the magical and the concrete, the spiritual and the mechanical. This is reflected in the title, which pairs an implement of navigation with a shifting of fates or oscillation between contrasting elements.

The three words which can be made up of these seven letters, and for which the reader is compelled to search horizontally, vertically, diagonally, backwards and forwards in the blocks of type, are “nirvana”, “karma” and “raka”. Nirvana is a Buddhist concept, and the word refers to the highest possible state of enlightenment. Karma is the Sanskrit term for agency or action, and also for the cosmic cause-effect system of which all actions are part, according to this belief system. Raka is a unit of prayer in Islamic tradition. The author’s meaning is not immediately clear, although certainly there are sufficient connections between all the elements of the poem to trace a number of possibilities. The combination of three very

distinct major Eastern religious terms and thus traditions might suggest unity through the recognition of common elements, but it could also betray a conflation of exotic 'others'.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the work is its involvement of the reader. In placing words, not quite hidden but also not clearly defined, within a block of the same letters that make up these words, the distinction between order and randomness is made clear. The eye seeks out the familiar; the literate viewer seeks out "nirvana" and with a bit of training "anavrin", but not "avannri". Although setting up such a work is of course far more complex than dismantling it, this is hidden from the reader, who is made to feel an equal participant.

A far more concise grid poem by the same author appeared in *Ophir* 4, also in 1968. Ostensibly it is the "half" in "Nege-en-"n-Half Gedigte" (Nine-and-a-Half Poems). The piece is printed on the bottom right of the page, over the page number. Judging by the different font and ink quality, it was added after or at least by a different method to the rest of the volume. The poem is seemingly concerned with laundry, and takes the form of a crossword-like structure, in which words and their intersections create a free-form pattern, accentuated by repetition and mirroring. The poem uses various permutations and arrangements of the words "Omo", "Fab" and "Surf", all brand names of washing powder, and "wash" which works as both verb and noun.

In "Van Gogh (for W.B.)" Michael Macnamara creates a composite poem, with a stanza of conventional verse accompanied by a concrete landscape of objects created by the shape of the typed text. The poem appeared in *Ophir* 4 in 1968. The poem is of interest here because one of the objects of the concrete landscape, the moon, is also a pattern poem. Macnamara uses the letters of the word "moon", two 'o's and the very similar 'n' and 'm' in a mode not unlike du Plessis's experiments with "Omo" in the previous poem. The word is written to intersect like an even-armed cross, and all the o's are piled in the middle, and then

augmented by a few extras, which are easy to fit because of their roundness. Altogether these elements create what passes for a figuration of a round, full moon.

A more complex poem by Macnamara, "Lavant?" (*Ophir*, 1970) employs a popular theme in South African poetry of the time: protest. Macnamara uses it as a word, just a word, but at the same time more than that, because it is linguistically and thus conceptually, as well as typographically and thus incidentally, linked to other words. He demonstrates this by blanking out, in a gesture which can't avoid the suggestion of a comment on censorship, parts of the word to reveal others. Taking out every second letter of "protest" yields "poet"; taking out the front, end, or both in various combinations provides "rote", "test", "rot" and "pest". Leaving just the 'o's for two successive lines works as an oversized colon before the punchline of the poem: "pro?est/ PROTEST", that is, 'for what is protest?'

Izwi featured two sets of poems written in made up alphabets. Intrinsically such texts are concerned with the nature of written language itself, and tend towards either the ideogrammatic or the a-representational, depending, essentially, on where they stand in relation to the nature of the relationship between language and world. Also, they are somewhat difficult to write about, not least because they resist quotation. Poems with their own alphabets are stand-offish in this way; they can be, perhaps, because they project the desire to not need linguistic engagement beyond their own presence on the page.

The first such poem, "Dugong", (*Izwi*, 1974) by Walter Battiss, is written in his Fook Island Script. It appears to be written longhand, and thus has asymmetrical, curvy lines and differing font sizes. The form of the 'letters', which seem generally to have an ideogrammatic origin, is complex and varied, but utterly inscrutable without a guide.

In 1973 *Izwi* ran two poems, titled "Hulde aan Don Mattera" and "Homage to Ahmed Dangor", attributed to its editors. Both of the poets referred to had been banned that year for

political activity. The twin poems have a visual dimension, taking the shape of two tombstones, or tablets of the commandment-bearing sort, or perhaps arched doorways. The poems are not identical because the titles indicate that they are written in Afrikaans and English respectively; one is a line longer than the other, and on close inspection the underlying letters differ across poems. The trouble is that neither of them can be read. The dual work is a comment on censorship illustrating the frustration of the muted text but also the power of unreadability. Each letter in each line – there do not seem to be spaces between them – has been carefully and systematically crossed out by a uniform 'x'. The result is that the letters – and so, theoretically the words, and thus sense – of the text are still present, but they are barred from communication by the 'x's which stand over them. The hybridised letter forms, always x and something else, take on a new visual form, resembling complex characters from a fantastical alphabet. In this way the letter shapes, silenced one by one in rows, are also made to make another meaning, another point.

The Czech poet Jiří Valoch contributed a number of concrete and visual poems to *Ophir*, and in particular, some procedural works to *Ophir* 6 (1968). It is not indicated in the publication whether they are translations, or if they were written in English originally. The latter is more likely, given the importance of letter sequence and word shape to the texts. The need of an outlet for English-language works also partly explains Valoch's engagement with such a relatively obscure and culturally as well as geographically distant journal. In other issues, Peter Horn translated Valoch's poetry from German into English.

In "Poetry for Everyday" the word "nevermore" is split into its components, (n)ever more, and subjected to a permutation sequence. The three parts, 'n', 'ever' and 'more' are rearranged six times in total, in two stanzas of three lines each. Each variation provides some potential connotative meaning, but there is no interaction between lines. Rather, it seems that the words run in continuous sequence upon some greater, unseen structure, and the poem

offers a window onto them as they go past: it is implicitly a matter of luck to glimpse the phrase in recognisable order.

The same issue features a “Sonnet” by Valoch, in which “etc” is repeated within a rigid line length and stanza structure, and “The Last Poem” in which an exclamation mark has the last word over a crossed out exclamation mark. Of especial interest is “Little Poem”. This four-line work is concerned with the mismatch between letters in the names of numbers, the digits representing them, and their sequence. Thus the first line, whose number is ‘1’ and word should therefore be ‘one’, because it is the first, can only have one letter: “o”. Line two is permitted two letters, for logical reasons which still do not accommodate the length of the word. The same happens in line three, which has far more letters in its word than its position allows for. The problem is resolved in the fourth line, which is entitled to four letters, in accordance with its place in the sequence, and thus its complete word.

Paul de Vree, a Belgian poet and artist well established internationally by this period, contributed mostly concrete and visual poems to *Wurm*, as did Ivo Vroom, but one of these untitled pieces passes as a procedural work. Its subject is grains of the food couscous, or “kuskus” in the Dutch spelling. The word grains, at three letters each, are small, all alike, packed close together, identical but unevenly arranged, and endlessly repeated. The poem begins with “kuskuskuskuskus” and ends in the same way. In between, each line begins one letter further in the sequence, so the second line is “uskuskuskuskusku” and so on. Thus the movement is carefully sequential and takes ten lines to complete the cycle away from and back to the first line. This completes the list of procedural and permutation poems published in these three journals over the course of a decade.

Besides the literary-historical trajectory into which these poems fit, there are perhaps other continuities embedded in them, which are worth pursuing. The connection to Oulipo’s

project is conceptual and ongoing. In the background to the European contributions to the journals discussed is a bigger network of exchange fostered on two grounds: that between Afrikaans, Dutch, Flemish, and Belgian writers through the linguistic-historical familiarity of the languages they used and (often with overlap between the two) on formalist grounds. Jensma published several concrete poems in the Dutch magazine *Labris*, and he as well as Du Plessis and Casper Schmidt seem to have been involved in some capacity with *Artsjok* and *Argo*. Both the Dutch and the Czech connections triangulate, conceptually and historically, with transnational aspects of the Beat generation through experiments with form which bear the profound impact, absorbed in various ways, of Williams's Imagism and carry Cummings's typographical abstractions. There is also an echo of Ginsberg's concerted efforts at fostering international conversation and exchange, and in particular his involvement in the student movement in Prague in 1968, which led to his crowning as the May King, a gesture at once poetic and political. These connections are detailed in *The Transnational Beat Generation* (2012) edited by Nancy Grace and Jennie Skerl, but none of the essays in the collection trace the South African aspect.

Procedural and permutation poetry, a variant of formalist experimentation, is situated on the modernist/postmodernist cusp of literary history. As such it occupies a particular place not only aesthetically but also in terms of literary and cultural ideas about art, and their global political implications. This type of poetry is also potentially transcendent of the limitation of temporal and geographical locality, in that its key focus is on process rather than product, and its concern is always with the plasticity of text as a value, rather than a meaning.

The form was practised in South Africa in the 1960s by a small affiliation of authors, and many examples survive in the pages of three small journals especially and unusually open to such experimental work at the time. These publications fostered international contact which was otherwise limited during the apartheid era for political as well as logistical reasons. The

work discussed, in the contested context in which it appeared, also introduced the possibility of alternative or counter-mainstream, even anti-establishment, artistic and ideological positions on formalist grounds.

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Notes

[1] All Afrikaans to English translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

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